

Some Words

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Submitted to the faculty of the Herron School of Art and Design
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University


September 2017

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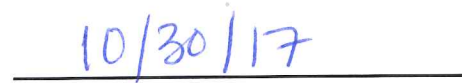

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Accepted: September 2017


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Thesis abstract

From the earlier work *Rocks and Heart Sutra*, to the last piece of work I created in graduate school - *Star, Dust*, I ask myself, what happened in between? Have these stars risen from the rocks before? Have any of them fallen to dust? Are we also walking through the vast universe and on some planets we are stars, but on others we are rocks? Aren't Being, consciousness and language also like this? Is there an absolute truth, reality or mind radiant beyond the light of the stars and long-lasting as a rock?

This paper is a little journey in exploring various themes through my art work. From transformation and consciousness to action and inaction; from material and immaterial to permanence and impermanence; from primary force, intuition to language, Being and nothingness. It reflects my philosophical background in Taoism and Zen, and reveals some basic concepts of my art work: Being is art, art is about Being, and the living process is real language. Further on, the paper also relates the intuition, simple Being and meditative Being of my work to the healing function and the shamanistic tradition in art.

Through the revelation of individual art work which appears on the temporal level, this paper intends to offer the reader a meditative reading experience of my art work and of *Some Words* itself. Beyond the sky of language and Being, is emptiness and nothingness; there, I see mind is the star of its own, dust of its own.

Introduction

As an artist, formerly I was trained as a painter. Based on my foundation of painting, my recent art practice has been more focused on performance, action, and installation. Although my work needs visual elements to embody itself, the form of my work is rather simple, and their dependence on visual elements is minimal. From carrying bottled air on my travels to worshipping dew drops; from playing music to cows to washing a Buddha statue in the temple; from writing with water on a mountain rock to revealing star dust on a gallery wall; from collecting sounds with glass jars to practicing flying on top of a mound, to me, art and life are one meditative Being, trivia and significance are no difference in practice. Considering that either physical material, form, body language and movement developed from consciousness and intuition or from Being and nothingness, I seek to form a language which is based on the working process with the primary force and how this approach performs its healing function in both art and our well-Being. I also seek to understand and broaden art practice which is not limited to social, psychological, or visual contexts, but in a broader context of “Being”. Based on these concepts, my work speaks to the relationship of Being and nothingness, action and inaction, material and immaterial. It also seeks to reveal the transformation between visible and invisible, fullness and emptiness, permanence and impermanence. Ultimately my work seeks to unify Being and language, integrate life and art, and to achieve an openness, oneness and wholeness.

In referring to the word “Being” which I often used in this paper, I found it’s a word that can connect Materialism and Immaterialism, if it connotes both matter and mind, everythingness and nothingness; and refers to both action and inaction, Being and Non-being;

and if it's also a word that not only represents beings existing in time and space, but also their status in which the primary force resides.

While growing up in China, my aesthetic background was based on Eastern philosophies and traditions. I remember when I was a child, I spent time at my grandparents' straw bale hut. In spring, swallows flew back from the south and rebuilt their nest with their saliva on the ceiling of the living room. Outside, villagers were hand making angel hair noodles - a whole yard of noodles, as white and as thin as hair, and hung ceiling high from the blue sky to the ground. I helped grandma pick cotton flowers for spinning; grandpa swept the yard twice a day. These were my very first memories of materials, images and experiences. We didn't work much on crafting or farming as children. Most of time, children just played, but it was in that atmosphere that I learned – human and nature are one, humans nourish themselves through activities which are a meditative, integrative process of Being involving nature, time, space and material. Looking back at the art work I have been making, I realized how much this kind of Being, this meditative process, this feeling the oneness and wholeness of time, space and material have nourished my art.

In the 1980's and 90's in China, our school education was very interesting – on one hand, Maoism and Karl Marx's "Materialism" were the central subject in our political and philosophy class; on the other hand, our Chinese language and literature classes were based on traditional, classical Chinese Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. So after being taught "mind is based on material, and that matter is the fundamental substance in nature, and that all things, including mental aspects and consciousness, are results of material interactions "[1] from Marx and "人定胜天 human determination conquers nature" of Maoism[2] in one class, in the following class

we would read a story of fox spirits from Pu Songling^[3] or a chapter from Taodejing: “ The only motion is returning. The only useful quality, weakness. For though all creatures under heaven are the products of Being, Being itself is the product of Non-being.” ^[4] Since we were children, we just recited these works without really understanding them, and looked forward more to the 15 minute recess after each 45 minute class. After many years, looking back, I thought, maybe Mao and Laozi, Pu Songling and Marx have already made a reconciliation with each other, if they were able to make peace together in a child’s mind.

As the generation born after the Cultural Revolution, we didn’t witness all the conflicts and suffering in the social and political movement of earlier decades; neither were we old enough to be involved in political movements at the end of the 1980’s. China had not been stimulated by the market economy yet, and the country was still very natural and rural back then. Buddhism and Taoism had always been in the air. We started to learn more about Western art, literature and philosophy in college, and I felt very fortunate that I didn’t have to continue studying Maoism and Marxism anymore. Learning Western literature and philosophy opened my eyes, gave me many new perspectives. At the same time, they made me realize that there were different mentalities and this led me back to study more of my own tradition in Taoism and Buddhism.

Years later, when I read the *The Secret Doctrine* from H. P. Blavatsky:

An omnipresent, Eternal, Boundless, and Immutable principle on which all speculation is impossible, since it transcends the power of human conception and could only be dwarfed by any human expression or similitude. It is beyond the range and reach of thought – in the word of *Mandukya Upanishad*, “unthinkable and unspeakable...one absolute Reality which antecedes all manifested, conditioned being. This infinite and eternal cause – dimly formulated in the

“Unconscious” and “Unknowable” of current European philosophy – is the rootless root of “all that was, is, or ever shall be”. It is of course devoid of all attributes and essentially without any relation to manifested finite Being. It is “Be-ness” rather than Being, and is beyond all thought or speculation...is also symbolized by the term “The Great Breath” ^[5]

It reminded me of 道德经 *Daodejing*:

The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name...There was something undefined and complete, coming into existence before Heaven and Earth. How still it was and formless, standing alone, and undergoing no change, reaching everywhere and in no danger (of being exhausted)! It may be regarded as the Mother of all things. I do not know its name, and I give it the designation of the Tao (the Way or Course). Making an effort further to give it a name, I call it The Great. ^[6]

Recently, I heard about a talk of Eva Beuys from the year of 1982:

for people of our tradition the idea of accomplishment is associated too deeply with the (burdensome) demand for supreme achievements of the most complex kind, of the kind that have been achieved time and again in science, or in the art of Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and many great people in the cultural development of the West. So the simple things in particular, like drinking a cup of tea, are the most difficult of all, and this is the real problem of understanding between the Western and Eastern mentality, ^[7]

I then thought, oh, that’s exactly the essence of “Wuwei” (Inaction, Non-doing, action without action) in Taoism – to Be with a cup of tea. But it turned more alive to me in Beuys’ language than the Wuwei in Daodejing that we recited as a teenager. Or when John Cage talked about “listening” to the traffic sounds or go mushroom hunting rather than playing piano, I thought, that’s it, that’s exactly how it was described about the finest form and sound in Taodejing - the 天籁(The sound of the cosmos) is greater than 人籁(the sound of the human), and 大音稀声,大象无形 (The great note is rarified sound, The great image has no form).^[8]

In my mind, I realized it was the expanded consciousness that was able to achieve such an infinite status which can include all elements, and that art is no more a single mind effort but a spontaneous action or a component of this enlarged sky of consciousness. The most beautiful thing to me about the achievements of these Western pioneers was, they were able to reach another shore of mentality through the effort of understanding, acting and direct experience. In fact, this direct experience IS the essence of many ancient wisdom in its traditions. Like 六祖慧(惠)能^[9] Huineng pointed: 不立文字, 直指人心, 见性成佛^[10] (No dependence upon words and letters; Direct pointing at the soul of man; Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddhahood.) And this direct experience is very much related to intuition and primary force of Being.

To clarify the role of religion in my art – from the earlier work *Three Temples*, to *Rocks and Heart Sutra*; from *Book from the Sky*, to *Dew Land*, there are themes and titles relating to religion. Readers may question the relationship between me, my work and different religions. I couldn't say either I am Taoist, Buddhist, or Christian; nor could I say I am religious or non-religious. In modern times, religion has been narrowed down to such an actually non-modern status, which has separated religions from their rich traditions that relate to art, literature, philosophy and science. For example, ancient Chinese Taoism is a religion, a philosophy, it has produced great literary texts, philosophical doctrines, healing methods and art works, but it's more about "Tao"- the way of living, and in this way, we can say it's a science of living methodology.

While writing this paper, I often came to a pine tree in a nearby park. I didn't know what to write so often I just sat under the tree and waited. Pine and air heal, as my Taoist ancestors

would have said. I often played some sound recordings in the background while I was waiting, the one playing now is titled: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.” ^[11]

Rocks and Heart Sutra [Action, Writing documentation. 2013]

In the winter of 2013, I flew from Indiana to Beijing, landing in my home country which I had been away from for a few years. Just getting out of the airport, I found my wallet, passport and banking cards were all stolen from my backpack. While waiting to get my documents reissued, I went to a small village which was among the Yan mountains north of Beijing. It was the end of winter, yet the mountains were still frozen. I first came to a village named Hua Mu (Wood Blossom) at the foot of the mountain. An old couple sheltered me and offered me home made food. From Hua Mu, I walked along up to the top of the mountain and found another village called Rock Village. There was no market, only a little shop that sold a few things. I bought matches and candles there. It took a few miles to walk down the mountain to get vegetables and grains. Because of the inconvenience of the transportation, many people took their children to cities for work and school, so there were many abandoned houses and yards in the village. I found a small house in a little yard, it had a clay bed, a fire basin, water jars and a clay stove. People in the village helped me contact the owner who asked for very little money for me to stay there. So, I settled in.

In the morning, I got up and went to a nearby creek to wash and get some water back for the day. Then I went to go collect wood for cooking and feeding the fire basin. Sometimes the wood was hard to light up on the wet days, and I discovered pine needles were good starters. I could see from my yard that there was a little pine forest on top of another mountain peak. A

villager showed me the way to get there and warned me there used to be wolves coming in and out. I had never seen a wolf before and all the time I lived there, I never seen one either.

There were many days where I stayed in the clay bed after the sun went down. Through my window, I watched the mountains change their color from light blue, to dark brown to black. I saw eagles flying on top of the highest peaks and disappearing into the cliffs to rest in the darkness. I would add more wood to the fire basin and soak my feet in the hot water. It was such a good deed to one self - having a hot foot bath while holding a book in hand. All in a small village as small as a pebble, among a vast expanse of rocks.

Sometimes during the day, I also went to a big rock near the village. Engraved on it was 心经 “The Heart Sutra.” ^[12] The original carving, which was from a very ancient time, is barely recognizable any more. A new carving in a rough, new style painted in red replaced it on top, I suppose it was from the 1980’s. Yet, every time I stood in front of it, it gave me new inspirations.

Heart Sutra

Śāriputra, form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form. Form itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form. Sensation, conception, synthesis, and discrimination are also such as this. Śāriputra, all dharmas are empty — they are neither created nor destroyed, neither defiled nor pure, and they neither increase nor diminish. This is because in emptiness there is no form, sensation, conception, synthesis, or discrimination. There are no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or thoughts. There are no forms, sounds, scents, tastes, sensations, or dharmas. There is no field of vision and there is no realm of thoughts. There is no ignorance nor elimination of ignorance, even up to and including no old age and death, nor elimination of old age and death. There is no suffering, its accumulation, its elimination, or a path. There is no understanding and no attaining.

Because there is no attainment, bodhisattvas rely on Prajñāpāramitā, and their minds have no obstructions. Since there are no obstructions, they have no fears. Because they are detached from backwards dream-thinking, their final result is Nirvāṇa. Because all buddhas of the past, present, and

future rely on Prajñāpāramitā, they attain Anuttarā Samyaksaṃbodhi. Therefore, know that Prajñāpāramitā is a great spiritual mantra, a great brilliant mantra, an unsurpassed mantra, and an unequalled mantra. The Prajñāpāramitā Mantra is spoken because it can truly remove all afflictions. The mantra is spoken thusly:

gate gate pāragate pārasaṃgate bodhi svāhā ^[12]

Thus, I thought about writing my own Heart Sutra. With the weather getting warmer, I was able to go on long hikes up to the mountain tops, to see many giant rocks. I took my brush with me and practiced writing my own Heart Sutra on those rocks with creek water. This was written in my diary:

This morning I went to the creek to practice my calligraphy on the rocks. I picked a little brown brush, stuck it into the bun of my hair and started off.

The rocks have bared their body(bodies) in the morning sunlight. I assume they woke up earlier than me. I also thought they might have had talks to each other last night. If I learn how to talk to a rock, I could become a poet. But they look like they don't care for talking much, and instead just sitting there, resting for a thousand years.

First, I saw a flat rock, the size of a deck on a small ship. I wrote "Mermaid", then left.

I walked to another big quiet rock, dipped my brush with the creek water but the water dropped on the rock too much at once, and the rock became pink brown. It surprised me, for I thought it was a grey rock.

After I walked to the very upper level of the creek, I found the rock I was looking for today. It gently slanted, made the creek a pattern of little snakes, and made a little water fall too. I washed my face with the snaking water and took a few sips from the little waterfall. Then I practiced my plough posture (a yoga asana) on it. A pine tree branch bent over, as if it was practicing the same posture together with me. I remembered a song I made when I was 19 and wrote on the rock, the song goes like this: "In the spring, I was a flower. I had some rain, I had some wine, I was drunk under the sun. The sun went away to look for the flower, for I had become a melon... I am a flower..." At the end, all the writing dried out from the rock under the sun, became mist, disappeared into the air. Only a thick crooked character "花" (flower) paralyzed on the giant rock as if it were drunk, as if it were the only star in a boundless night sky. And I know, after one moment, it will also be gone with the wind.

I wonder if every rock I saw there was a fallen star with an unknown name. They never talked to me. They spoke to me in silence. They showed me surprises and magic, and taught me forms, shapes, formlessness and shapelessness. They took me back to many of their original, mysterious universes where they were from. When I walked on them, I felt warm and at peace, as if the universe was holding a little kid warmly in its thick, giant palm. I wrote some words there, some were poetry, some were not. When spring came, I sowed some seeds of radishes and peas, but it was also time for me to leave the mountain.

A Labyrinth. [Salt Installation. Video documentation. 2015]



A labyrinth. Salt Installation. Video Documentation. Fountain square, Indianapolis, Indiana. 2015

After living in the rock village and writing the heart sutra, I produced more performance and action work related to words and calligraphy. *A Labyrinth* is a salt installation I created in

Indiana in 2015. It was a children's game we played in China, and I added calligraphy of a song to the structure of the labyrinth. The song goes like this; "Look, look, look for a friend. I meet a good friend, salute, shake hands, you are my good friend. Good bye." As all the children who played in the labyrinth have left, the piece also disappeared into the wind at the end of the day. If I say the song is to the memory of childhood and the form of the labyrinth is a ritual to the earth, then the disappearance of everything in the wind is truly a returning: returned to invisible and impermanence.

All beings on this universe are existences, yet both the beginning and the end of Being or universe is emptiness. Then why don't we care as much about this emptiness as we care about the existences?

Taoism has discussions about the nothingness and emptiness:

We put thirty spokes together and call it a wheel; but it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the wheel depends. We turn clay to make a vessel; but it is on the space where there is nothing that the usefulness of the vessel depends. We pierce doors and windows to make a house; and it is on these spaces where there is nothing that the usefulness of the house depends. ^[13]

Whether writing into the sky, in the sea, or on a rock, this writing is also an engraving - not into the visible material but into the invisible. Through these disappeared writings, I want to ask the sky, water, rock and earth: "are you going to lose the memory of me?" Maybe I shouldn't say memory, but rather should say: "Memory, I treasure you but don't worship you, for you are not enough to build the nest above the sky of Pneuma ^[14]." Above the thousand-petaled lotus, there are no words, no memory, only a transparency, the transparency of Being, like a fish building her transparent nest in the water, with a transparent body.

Maybe the confluence of emptiness and words; the migration between sky and ground, is the eternal reality. From the salt installation *A Labyrinth* – in which a writer was crawling upon a foreign land intimating the earth with salt, the song of memory and her mother tone, to the later work *Fly* [Action. video documentation. Angel Mounds. Indiana. 2016], my work is also a questioning of the relation between returning and departing; between reality and imagining; between the earth and the sky.

Dew Land [Performance. Video documentation. 2016]

Viewers have said the performer in *Rocks and Heart Sutra* is like an ancient Zen practitioner. I have never tried to practice Zen on purpose, yet I don't deny that I have met with some of its profound doctrines and how this great philosophy has greeted me in the daily living and small things of life. In those first few years I came to the States, we lived in an abandoned house in the country. My two small children and I would go on a road out of the house every morning, for there was a little dog who always greeted us there and we called her Cinderella. We picked flowers in spring and walnuts in the fall. We played with all the bugs in the house and rabbits and squirrels in the woods. It was during those years, I discovered tea ceremony.

In the endless washing, soaking, pouring, at the end, the sip from a little cup was not only tea, but a taste of the solemn, and a sense of kindness. Solemn is from taking something out of nothingness; kindness is being company with oneself and time. A ladybug can be a tea friend and a leftover cauliflower root can be my Ikebana. ^[15] At that time, I also read *The Book of Tea* by Okakura Kakuzo - who was the first person to introduce the ancient Zen philosophy to the Western world in modern language:

A special contribution of Zen to Eastern thought was its recognition of the mundane as of equal importance with the spiritual. It held that in the great relation of things there was no distinction of small and great, an atom possessing equal possibilities with the universe. The seeker for perfection must discover in his own life the reflection of the inner light. The organization of the Zen monastery was very significant of this point of view. To every member, except the abbot, was assigned some special work in the caretaking of the monastery, and curiously enough, to the novices was committed the lighter duties, while to the most respected and advanced monks were given the more irksome and menial tasks. Such services formed a part of the Zen discipline and every least action must be done absolutely perfectly. Thus many a weighty discussion ensued while weeding the garden, paring a turnip, or serving tea. The whole ideal of Teism is a result of this Zen conception of greatness in the smallest incidents of life. Taoism furnished the basis for aesthetic ideals, Zen made them practical. ^[16]

Years later, my tea practicing was abandoned and my tea ocean ^[17] dried and started to crack, yet I still remember Okakura. In 2016, I created *Dew Land* [Performance. Video Documentation.2016]. Dew land (Roji) is the path leading through the garden to the tea room in a tea ceremony. The character dew 露 contains two parts: Water 雨 and path 路.



Dew Land. [Performance. Video Documentation. 2016]

Okakura Kakuzo wrote about Dew land (Roji) in *The Book of Tea*:

The size of the orthodox tea-room, which is four mats and a half, or ten feet square, is determined by a passage in the Sutra of Vikramadytia. In that interesting work, Vikramadytia welcomes the Saint Manjushiri and eighty-four thousand disciples of Buddha in a room of this size, -- an allegory based on the theory of the non-existence of space to the truly enlightened. Again the roji, the garden path which leads from the machiai to the tea-room, signified the first stage of meditation--the passage into self-illumination. The roji was intended to break connection with the outside world, and produce a fresh sensation conducive to the full enjoyment of aestheticism in the tea-room itself. The nature of the sensations to be aroused in passing through the roji differed with different tea-masters. Some, like Rikiu, aimed at utter loneliness... ^[18]

When we look at dew, we can't help being surprised: it doesn't possess anything except its tiny transparent body; the life of a dew is no longer than a night and a dawn, but look how many inspirations it has brought to us - inspiration of the beauty and impermanence of life.

Dew drops are free of attachment, and they are full of serenity. There is one sentence that could describe dew: “Living in the world but not of it.” In the garden of Zen philosophy, dew is the supreme incarnation of 靈^[19] Ling (Soul, ethereal being, spirit).

Just as the title of this work suggested, *Dew Land* is a Roji - something in between; a passage leading from the outer to the inner space. I walked on it, as if I was walking from solitude and silence to light and joy. I then understood the other meaning of “露地 dew land” in Buddhism, a bare field absent of coverage and suffering.

Dew Land is a performance worked with time. It brought the slowness and meditative side out of Being: we can say to experience the subtlety of time passing in the life of dew, in its evaporating. We see that time is a concept. It eventually comes to Being, the status of Being creates its own time. Just like we wonder if a dew drop holds the same perspective to the concept of time as us, us humans?

All things are sentient beings. All beings are residences for divinity. Those gods, goddesses, Buddha, immortals, sages, who have lived in rivers, lakes, oceans, forests, mountains, have they disappeared? If they really have disappeared, I thought they must have arrived in places more immense and subtle - distant as other planets, but as small as trees, rocks, sand and dew.

Every sand grain. [Performance. Video documentation.2016]

How tiny sand grains are: you throw them in the water, they vanish; you cast them in the wind, they disappear. How many sand grains are on a beach? on a playground? even in a sand box? I am often surprised by this quantity and proportion of the world, like a tree and all its leaves; a quilt and its threads; a room with all the dust in it. Even in my porridge bowl, there

are thousands of millet grains. I am not a mathematician, but rather enjoy the pure fresh mind which was brought by quantity. In the early spring, how many new tiny sprouts crawling out, they will bring me how many joys. Just like watching a full ground of fallen leaves in the fall, but suddenly we lifted our heads and saw a naked tree, bared everything, returned itself to zero. I often think that nature is an art which was made not only by god; but If it was, it must be a god who loves mathematics. One beauty in math is order, another beauty is simplicity. Simply add one to another, adding to infinity; simply diminishing one by one, diminishing to zero.

Every Sand Grain is a performance piece. Through manipulating with sand, I created a process of transformation from visible to invisible. This transformation is a mathematical, physical transformation from more to less to zero. It's also a transformation from fullness to emptiness, from permanence to impermanence.

On this planet we are living, in this splendid sophisticated universe, no visible sentient being can avoid this transformation - birth, death, rebirth. Yet nothing disappears. It transforms to another form of Being. Just like the sand grains in this work didn't diminish or vanish, but instead became a form invisible to our eyes, like water becomes vapor. Thus, the visible being is only one side of Being but not the absolute reality. There is a more subtle and deep Being that is invisible. The force of creation and the power of transformation between the visible and invisible, material and immaterial, is the absolute reality of the universe. Just like in *Every sand grain* piece, what brought the change from visible to invisible was not sand, neither time or space, nor the hand manipulating the material, but an awakening to impermanence.







Every Sand Grain. Performance. Video documentation. 2016

In *Every Sand Grain*, maybe you could see a uniting of Tao; an emptiness of Zen; or just the magic of zero. A zero which is one pinch of sand in its very beginning, one dot, then this zero started to grow, expand, and it transcended to a new form at the moment of its vanishing: a new, invisible zero which was generated from its own transformation.

Fly [Action. Video documentation. Angel Mounds. Indiana. 2016]



Fly. Action. Video Documentation. Angel Mounds, Indiana. 2016

Fly is an action work performed in Angel Mounds, Indiana. I wrote long paragraphs trying to describe it:

As I live on the ground all the time, sometimes I think about flying. But what can I do with the body? Is a body a weight? Can it transform to wings? Are there lights within it? Is it transparent? Can it melt into water or burn into stars? At the end, will it be as light as air? When I was flying on top of the hill, was it really the body flying?

There are many flying little creatures in Angel Mounds ^[20]. Mosquitoes like to sing; bees enjoy dancing; grasshoppers take naps in your arms; and butterflies chase you everywhere.

When I was in Angel Mounds, I thought about the dreams humans had. I thought they were like these giant mounds. Under them, there must be many angel wings. If we like, they would fly out, and take us to the place we want to be.

Different cultures and religions had different legends about flying. Whether angels or Feitian 飞天^[21], with or without wings, in the dream or in the sky, flying is an ancient action many creatures performed.

I thought about how birds started flying. Some say they vibrated their wings and took off from the ground; some say they saved their body from falling off the cliff.

I thought about butterflies who vibrate their wings a million times to cross the ocean, and a mermaid – how her wings shrank to a small tail and went back to the sea. I thought about Chang'e, who flew to the moon after eating the longevity medicine and could never return to the earth again, and Icarus's melted wings made of wax, as he forgot to avoid getting too close to the sun while flying.

I also thought about the monkey King in the "Journey to the West"^[22], who after flying ten thousand miles, came to the edge of the sky, and saw five poles standing between heaven and earth, which were merely the five fingers of Buddha's hand.

More often these days, I think of those Feitian who fly and dance and cast flowers from the sky. The difference between Feitian and angels is, Feitian don't have wings. Instead of wings, they hold instruments to play sound in the sky and dance with floating flowers. They live on music, dance, dew and fragrance. In my "Fly" series, I would like to include the flying of these Feitian too, for they remind me to bring sound, movement and light together.

Yet, these descriptions were so unnecessary, for what I tried to say was only one simple thing - flying. I want people to see the goodness of this simplicity, like a beautiful crazy woman on the street, bare feet, who smiled and greeted everyone. I have read a few books, saw a few art works, but I didn't want to imitate others. I imitated nuns, priests, Zen masters and I failed at that too, because each of them was so truthful, yet no one couldn't be replaced by another. I wore my Daoism gown, went to the Zen temple, and read the Bible. After all of this, I suddenly realized I could crawl up a hill to practice my flying.

I have walked on some roads, paths, but haven't gone very far. I remembered monk Tang Xuanzang^[23] who walked a hundred eighty thousand miles to seek the Buddhist Sutra. After he reached the destination, standing on the bank of the river, he saw a dead body floating over.

Tang laid his eyes carefully on the body and was shocked, for he saw that it was himself. The Amitābha ^[24] standing by was talking to him then: “master, congratulations, you have cast your karma body and now you are liberated.” ^[25]

On our way in life, we turn back in a moment, yet time, space, things have all changed. Such is the fate of an individual and also the destination of humanity. *Fly* is about dream, a very ancient dream humans have had. Flying adds another dimension to our Being, without it, there would have been a poverty in our experience and a big loss to our humanity.

Fly is the form of the action, also the essence; *Fly* is the force, also the language. *Fly* is a movement, an event, an image, a shadow (of the video), a metaphor. *Fly* is developing to a continuing work unlimited in time, and it will be performed at different mounds/sites beyond Angel Mounds. It's a uniting of language and action; imagination and reality (Being). And this is also my ideal in both life and art - if we see a place where imagination and action are united; language and reality are in one, maybe such a place is not so far from us at all, maybe art can be our wings to fly up there.

A practitioner of Hermeticism, our anonymous friend, wrote this in the book *Meditations on the Tarot*:

...without image and without word. It is purely *movement*. Here consciousness is moved by the immediate contact with that which transcends it, with the trans-subjective. This experience is as certain as the experience belonging to the sense of *touch* in the physical world and is, at the same time, as much devoid of form, color and sound as the sense of touch. For this reason, one can compare it with this sense and designate it as "spiritual touch" or "intuition". ^[26]

Fly is a piece which can interpret the essence of my action work: Flying is an action. It's the intuition that performs; it's the primary force that speaks. It could be visually appealing but the main purpose of action is not about the form but about the essence. Having an audience is not a required element either in this event because the purpose of the action is to communicate directly with the cosmos. Like Joseph Beuys' quote, "Thought is sculpture", I would like to say: "Being is action". And this Being - the nothingness of it; the impermanence of it; the oneness and meditating of it has been a speaking voice in my art work.

Book from the sky. [Performance. Video documentation.2016]



Book from the sky. Performance. Video documentation.2016

Book from the sky 天书 is another performance piece I created. In the work, the performer walked to the middle of the room where a written scroll was hanging, she took the scroll down, ate it and walked away. *Book from the sky* 天书 is a Taoist term in Chinese. Originally, 天书 was

the combination of the ancient scriptures Hetu 河图 and Luoshu 洛书. In simplified Chinese, 天书 is an idiom that describes something not understandable or a text that is impossible to read.

Viewers have asked me what was written on the scroll which had been eaten by the performer in the work. I didn't give an answer. I think that's part of the meaning of the scroll, and also what the work was about - something was real, it was unknown, it was lost, it regained itself through this loss. I thought it was about truth and suffering, trust and uniting.

I was also asked about the magic of the eaten scroll in *Book from the sky*. Instead of believing magic is a trick, I rather believe what Papus said:

Magic is the study and practice of the control of Nature's secret forces. It is a science — pure, or dangerous — like all sciences... ^[27]

Instead of believing magic is a science, I rather believe that it's an ordinary process. Both *Book from the sky* and *Every sand grain* were developed in everyday chaos, either in the kitchen or on a children's playground. All the transcendental thoughts and philosophical questions that arose from ordinary Being eventually returned to the daily life, to meet with its eternal answers.

Collecting sounds falling from high above. [Installation. Photo documentation.2017



Collecting sounds falling from high above. Installation. Photo Documentation.2017

Glass jars are beautiful to me. They contain both solidarity and fragility; imagination and momentariness; sound and silence. There are many sounds in this world. Some are stimulating; some are tranquil; some are mysterious. I feel sound is an antenna or a wing of the human, and it can fly very high as stars and lightning. Sounds can be a feast to our ears, and we can lose the beauty of it if we don't listen with care. In fact, we have lost so many beautiful sounds already. There are sounds which are very very high, above the sky, that are almost disappearing. I am afraid they will fall, for sound also has a fragile body, when it falls from above, the whole world will feel the pain. I thought maybe there are things on the ground that can echo with this sound, can hold it, as if a poet's thick warm palm holds a melting snow flake and a neighbor woman's

opened Spaghetti sauce jar can store a falling star or lightning. At that time, I was also reading the Emerald tablet ^[28]:

That which is above is like to that which is below, and that which is below is like to that which is above, to accomplish the miracles of (the) one thing.

Sound is such an ancient Being. The even more ancient one is silence. Maybe this silence can greet and hold the broken. Maybe these jars can collect those sounds falling from high above.



Collecting sounds falling from high above. Installation. Photo Documentation.2017

From air to movement, from form to sound, from sound to light, they are all one Being. I would like to evoke the inner connection and transformation between these forms, between

form and essence; how a life force or consciousness transforms itself, how it inhabits itself in the universe; the immensity and limitation of these forces, and how the cosmos also manifests itself in them.

The universe seems so quiet and silenced sometimes. So is consciousness. It feels like snow, rain, or a tiny body of lightning. The moment when they are falling upon the earth, the earth was nourished. Consciousness is at one end, objects, sound, movement, words at the other end. The moment when they meet, language was generated. Language also can be silently without a sound, and completely without a trace. In *Collecting Sound Falling from High Above*, "I" eventually withdrew from this event physically, and let consciousness witness what was happening: these transparent, fragile yet solid bodies were receiving sounds falling from high above.

Some Words. [Installation. Photo documentation. 2017]



Some words. Installation. Photo documentation.2017

Some Words was another installation I created during my last semester of graduate school. It's also an action more than an installation to me. It was a display of 20 years of my hand writing, a gesture of both opening and closing. There had been many years of writing, and suddenly, I stopped and put them on a wall, to simply look at them in a visual form. Without adding or diminishing anything, it's in its most immediate form and body. It's an action of Being, an action of inaction.



Some words. Detail. Installation. Photo documentation. 2017

The initial source of this work was a part of my house cleaning. I thought, books of my old handwritings, after many years, I wanted to take them outside to breathe some fresh air. I also simply wanted to see the visual effect: massed pieces of little paper, written at different times, places, containing different memories, aged in different colors, if spread out next to each other on a large wall, would be magnificent. Maybe they could say something direct with their foreign strokes.

So I took these papers out of my notebooks and affixed them to the wall one by one. As I was doing this, I realized most of my work has been seeing and seeking the impermanence and immaterial side of Being, but this work led me to see the relation between material and immaterial, permanence and impermanence from the other side. I see that material(body) and essence are one and not separable, just like the body of these tiny thin papers, are not more or less than what they are saying or what I am trying to say here. The empty space left uncovered during the installation on the wall appeared like giant bubbles and became the center of the work. It made me realize, without the body, even the emptiness and bubbles won't exist.

It also feels like all those words had walked many years to come to a big wall, yet they couldn't say anything except hold themselves in their tiny, weak body, while trying to fill this wall. It let me see the limitation of the physical being in the visible world. I saw the emptiness of the unwritten, the uncovered space, the unreachable quality of words, yet this emptiness became living language, imbued the process with freshness. From being written records to participating in an action, these words and papers experienced a transformation in the process of a language regenerating. At the end of the installation, I stood in front of the wall like one tiny piece of paper. In a moment, my mind felt absent as if those words and I, we both were witnesses to the significance and weakness of each other.

Then those pieces of paper started to fall, like a peacock spreading its tail before the winter and all the little feathers started to fall. Sometimes, a gesture is all which has completed its most pure form and essence. What more can we ask for from a winter peacock?

I want to say *Some Words* is a work about paper not about words. Maybe we can talk about words at another time, such as its sound and silence, stillness and movements, greyness and whiteness.



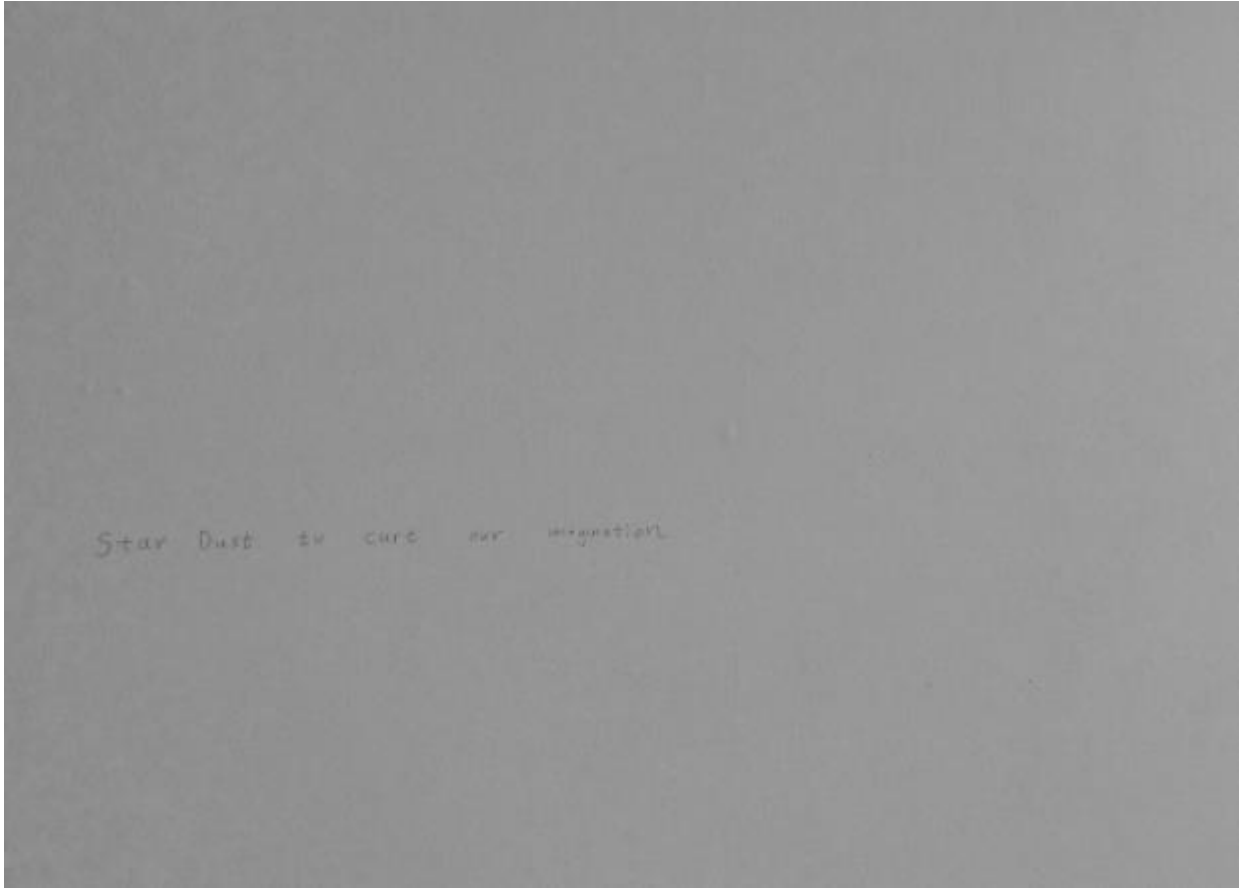
Some words. Installation. Photo documentation. 2017

Star Dust, Action, Photo documentation. 2017

Star Dust is an action piece. With a wall full of holes and stain spots from a previous exhibition, which bothered me the night before, instead of painting and covering the wall, I meditated on it, slowly, until early morning when, in my mind, all of the holes and stains had disappeared and the wall became a sky of stars. In the exhibition the next day, I was able to invite viewers to sit down with me in front of the wall listening to the story and enjoy watching all the stars and star dust on it. I thought, at least for one moment, viewers had felt enlightened through stars in their own imagination and through their beckoning to my work.



Star dust. Action. Photo documentation. 2017



Star dust. Action. Photo documentation. 2017

It was a miracle to me and this is also what I want to share with my audience through my work. Just like the title I wrote on the wall, “star dust to cure our imagination”. This is why my artwork has been communicating about Being, to come back to simple, meditative being; a status decreasing in mind but increasing in consciousness, imagination and intuition. For I believe this meditative Being is a place where healing can be done and real evolution takes place. This doesn’t mean the artist herself is a master of Being but rather a voice of calling for healing. If shamanism has been a long tradition in art, and every era has its own diseases and healers, we should inquire what diseases need to be cured in our era and what kind of healing work we can do with our art.

Many contemporary artists have put much effort and contributed in recent decades to understanding and initiating this healing process.

Joseph Beuys has said:

The idea of Shamanism is a reminder of a human constant without which we would be drastically impoverished. The Shaman brings about development. His nature is therapeutic. While Shamanism marks a point in the past, it also indicates a possibility for historical change and development. I realize the part the artist can play in indicating the traumas of a time and initiating a healing process. ^[29]

The Dutch writer and artist Louwrien Wijers published her book “Writing as sculpture” in the 1990’s. It’s a collection of interviews with some of the great thinkers from the late twentieth century including Dalai Lama, Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, Robert Filliou, David Bohm and many others. Wijers also organized a symposium “Art meets science and spirituality in a changing economy” in 1990 which brought many great minds together and formed more constructive dialogues between different cultures and disciplines. The relation between mind and matter, the material and immaterial, was still the main debate in many conversations of that meeting. The title of the symposium, took as a point of departure the Western viewpoint which separates spirit and matter. The Dalai Lama didn’t give a clear answer when he was asked about this relation between matter and mind by the scientists. Maybe it wasn’t time yet to give an answer. Modern science is still developing. The scientist today hasn’t realized that:

Matter can be changed into energy and energy into matter. The law that governs matter and energy is one and the same. Beneath all names and forms, there lies one unifying principle which is still not known in its entirety by modern scientists. Vedanta and the ancient sciences describe this underlying principle of life. There is only one life force, and all the forms and names in this universe are but varieties of that one. It is not difficult to understand the relation between two forms of matter because the source is one and the same. When water becomes solid, it is called ice. When it starts evaporating, it is called vapor. Young children do not know that these three are forms of same

matter, and that essentially there is no difference in their composition. The difference is only in the form it takes. The scientists today are like children. They do not realize the unity behind all matter, nor the principle for changing it from one form to another. ^[30]

So are the problems in our religions today:

The fundamental truths of all great religions are one and the same...The doctrine of faith in the East and West is being exploited by all the preachers of the world. Modern man is confused more by the preachers than by his own problem. What is the worth of that religion which create bondage and misery for man? Freedom is one of the prime messages given by the sages, but it has been obstructed so much that today's religious man lives like a slave, terrified and obsessed by evil and devils. He is more concerned about sin and Satan than self-realization and God. The philosophy of the new age demands complete modification of such religious concepts but, alas, there hasn't been a revolution in any of the religions so far. Without going through a socio-religious revolutionary process, the flower of true religion cannot bloom. Reformation and revolution are the signs and symptoms of the evolution of man. This revolution is made possible by changing the heart and practicing *ahimsā* in daily life. Love alone has the power to change. Such a revolution and change will prepare modern man for the next dimension of awareness which will then unite the whole of humanity. ^[31]

Coming from an Eastern culture and philosophical background, I have always felt inspired more by transcendental thoughts than Materialism; relied on intuition more than reason. If I say materiality (matter) is one side of Being, then I find this matter contains infinite openings to its invisible sides and insides which are an absence of matter that could be named emptiness, nothingness, or Non-Being. But I gradually came to realize that matter is a fact, a mentality and an unavoidable side of Being. It has deep roots and a profound relevance to the world. And modern civilization could have not achieved so much without the contribution of Materialism. Just like over the past decades, many western philosophers, scientists, religious leaders, and artists have put much effort to embrace Eastern philosophy as well, and many of them have devoted themselves to the practice of Eastern traditions. Like Alexandra David-Neel, the

woman who walked through Tibetan mountains on foot and wrote many books about Tibet. Like the artist Joseph Beuys, who “has throughout his career joined East and West in the primordial source of his thinking, his action, his drawing and his sculptures.” ^[32] Like artist John Cage, who had become a dedicated Zen practitioner in his art and music.

The era Okakura Kakuzo wrote about - “That at the beginning of the No-beginning, spirit and Matter met in mortal combat ... The East and West, like two dragons tossed in a sea of ferment, in vain strive to regain the jewel of life” ^[33] - has already ended. Both East and West have put forth much effort to understand, to accept and to unite with each other. When we talk about the problem of our time now, it’s not the problem of Western and Eastern anymore, for we are all one world. And we are all facing the same question - where are we from and where are we going? - under this supreme achievement of Materialism, war, destruction and pollution.

I wrote this in my artist statement: I would like to say my work serves a reminder to the impermanence of Being, as in our time, war, violence, crime...many problems are caused by the problems of our inner being, the misunderstanding and incomplete realization toward the world especially to ourselves. Human suffering often comes from excessive desire and over-attachment to the material world. The ephemeral reality, impermanence of Being and immateriality are often obscured, forgotten and unrealized.

But this is really not my purpose of art making, to save the world or try to serve others. For I believe If we all understand ourselves better, to understand the relation between us and the world, to make ourselves well in our Being, then there won’t be that many conflicts and problems. And that’s why my work has been communicating about Being, and speaking to the relation between Being and nothingness, action and inaction, material and immaterial.

I remembered a conversation between Joseph Beuys and Lama Sogyal: ^[34]

Joseph Beuys: ...so I see the values of the West try to split away from the spiritual grounds...in order to come to a very strong and systematic analysis of the material condition only. So, the man in the West is bound to material power...

Lama Sogyal: And what modern art has done is ... it lets you see it is there, but you are just left there and you don't know, 'Now to do what?'

Joseph Beuys: That's right...

Lama Sogyal: ...and that is where you have to take it, to mould it...it is very interesting... for instance in the tantric teaching...that with any particular expression, or changes that happen...as they hit you...at the moment of reaction, like a shock, or whatever...to not watch the object of the art, at the moment of the reaction, but to watch the mind...the artist, so to speak...and then to understand the nature of the mind...and then to work with the artist in a sense...to work with oneself...And so, this is where, I think, really art could be carried on to...

Joseph Beuys: Yes...

...

Joseph Beuys: Unity itself...

Lama Sogyal: True...unity itself...and

...

Joseph Beuys: In the Western world there is one result for all the needs, that is coming from the one-sidedness of working with the so-called analytical sciences...the positivistic, or atomical understanding of the world...That was for the many natures in the Western world the cutting of an umbilical cord...so then, the people were completely alone...Now the people have to come to their own recreation...that pushed the will power towards a special point...Now we are standing before a big wall...with this potential power...

Through his whole life and career, Beuys had sought the truth with a much more spread and deepened root, and strived to embrace other realities and mentalities in his work. From spending three days in a room with a coyote to planting seven thousand oak trees, Beuys' action work has been the action of action to me. In my own artwork, I am finding more inaction of action, Non-Being of Being in it, which came from the Immaterialism that is deeply rooted in

my mentality. Just like the *Star Dust* piece, it's a work that no longer questions the relation between mind and matter, materiality and immateriality, but rather reveals an absolute sky of imagination and intuition, with emptiness, nothingness, inaction and Non-Being. Materially, nothing was changed on the wall, a wall full of holes and stains was transformed to a sky of stars the next day in the exhibition. What happened in between? What is that night long meditation on the wall about? Embracing? Uniting? In believing everything holds an infinite universe of its own? Lighting? Naming? Yet I know nothing was changed but everything has changed; Nothing was touched but everything has been touched, on a wall, in our mind, by our imagination.

In the work *Star Dust*, there was no pre-made language; everything was in a status of complete openness and acceptance. A wall with holes and stains, the exhibition next day, a sleepless night. Yet, if we hold our trust long enough in ourselves and in everything, then we will remember "dragons that at the last moment turn into princesses." ^[35] In order to experience or to create such an experience of the miraculous, we have to endure and trust. To let intuition speak and lead; to be able to live in a constantly new, alive language which was created by endless moments of adventure. Such a process is led by intuition, by mystery, by the unknown. Swami Rama wrote about intuition in his book *Living with the Himalayan Masters*:

A stage comes when intellect can't guide us, and only intuition can show us the way. Intellect examines, calculates, decides, accepts and rejects all that is happening within the spheres of the mind, but intuition is an uninterrupted flow which dawns spontaneously from its source, down deep within. It dawns only when the mind attains a state of tranquility, equilibrium and equanimity. That pure intuition expands the human consciousness in a way that one starts seeing things clearly. Life as a whole is comprehended, and ignorance is dispelled. After a series of experiences, direct experience becomes a guide and one starts receiving intuition spontaneously. ^[36]

What I am also seeking in my art is to break the boundaries between art and non-art. Despite the tradition of Dadaism or the “Social sculpture” movement Joseph Beuys had led through, if we only look at Being and Non-Being as one and a whole, if we come back to the essence of this Being, then we realize there are no boundaries between forms nor between art and non-art. It’s not the form but the primary force, the consciousness is the essence. And when this is realized, nothing could be excluded from art; no process could be separated from art. We will have a much more open heart to the living process and this living process will become the language, the work. Such a language will become the real being in which its own organism lives; the unknown is its quality and evolution is its essence. In this way, art becomes a healing therapeutic tool to remove all the dead and old habits and can constantly renew us, give us life, new meaning and lead us to a higher consciousness and bring us back to the core of Being. And we don’t need to talk about forms, material etc., but are able to communicate at a place where deep Being inhabits – a place which truly connects the artist and audience, connects the past and future.

Air, [Installation, Photo documentation. 2017]



Air. Installation. Photo Documentation. 2017

Air was another installation of my work. The letters I used for *Air* were taken from abandoned labels from the previous exhibition. Air has been an on-going theme in my art practice – for example, there was the bottled air I have taken on my travels. I have also written stories about an imaginary little character whose name was Air.

Air doesn't possess anything, yet it holds everything; it doesn't exclude anything but accepts everything. Air is the weakest being, yet it can blow all away with its nothingness. Air is

everywhere, in our body, in our breath, but it's the most easily forgotten thing by us, or more often when it's remembered, are the times we misunderstand it as distance.

If you let yourself be with the vastness of air – in an empty room has nothing, or on an open mountain top, and just be like air - you will be moved and melted. Air has offered us so much. Maybe in the near future, there will be art which is more like air. Maybe that's a gift we can give back to air.

Like what I have mentioned in *Collecting Sounds Falling from High Above*, art can be an event, like a slowly walking planet which is a part of the universe, a universe of itself, and also the universe of other. Art also can be dialogue: a dialogue with self; with our predecessors; with an absolute spirit; with some touchable or untouchable, imaginable or unimaginable air.

Everything happens in the air, all the events, movements, sounds, conversations, thoughts have all been recorded, and air is the best recorder. *Air* makes me think of Being and Non-Being, and again this Being and Non-Being is no more a question because of the existence of air. After all, everything will disappear; after all, everything will still be here, in the endless air.

While I am sitting in a tiny piece of sunshine and continue writing this paper, I hear the "Pong ... pong..." sound from cross the street. Several teenagers are playing basketball there, and the wind is walking through them, walking through me like walking through a tiny pavilion, blown away to somewhere that I don't know. I thought about our predecessors, the ancients, the long gone human civilizations. I thought about Homer's "Generations of men are like the leaves". I thought about those disappeared humans and things, their new generations (becoming) and the space they left. I thought about the stars who have fallen and their dust, and some other giant planets which are slowly moving at a faraway distance. If I think of these

planets and this distance, I feel warm like the endless imagination and attachment brought by a giant mystery. I then feel the smallness of me could become a rock written by a person or a thunderbolt a million years hence, or become something as light as air, flown through by birds, eagles, butterflies or other wings. I imagine there would be vast emptiness in the world of the future, and we will live there as if living in endless mysteries.

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[14] Pneuma is an ancient Greek word for: breath, spirit, wind; air in motion. Related to blow, to breathe. In a religious context for "spirit" or "soul".

[15] Ikebana かど う is the Japanese art of flower arrangement.

[16] Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea*, Copyright, 1906 by Fox Duffield & Company. New York. Page. 68 – 69.

[17] Tea ocean 茶海 is a bamboo tray that used for Chinese tea ceremonies. The top has slats for water (or tea) to fall through to the second piece, which is a hollow basin underneath to collect the water. Once done serving tea, the top can be taken off and water poured out.

[18] Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea*, Copyright, 1906 by Fox Duffield & Company. New York.P.81– 82.

[19] 靈 Ling contains three parts in its character, “Shaman”, “mouth” and “rain”. It can be interpreted as a shaman prays for rain. 靈 Ling is a transcendental being status through which human connect themselves with the universe and its healing power.

[20] Angel Mounds, a state historic site located in southern Indiana. It is nationally recognized as one of the best- preserved prehistoric Native American sites in the United States.

[21] Feitian 飞天 In Buddhism term is Gandhanra.

[22] *Journey to the West* 西游记 is a Chinese novel published in the 16th century during the Ming dynasty and attributed to Wu Cheng'en. The novel is an extended account of the legendary pilgrimage of the Tang dynasty Buddhism monk Xuanzang who traveled to the “Western regions”, that is, central Asia and India, to obtain Buddhist sacred texts (Sutras) and returned after many trials and much suffering.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Journey_to_the_West This page was last edited on 22 June 2017, at 09:53.

[23] Tang Xuanzang, The Buddhism monk in Journey to the West. See [10]

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